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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR SAYS GERMANS ARRIVING IN A FEW DAYS

REF: BEIRUT 2772

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4(d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) During an August 26 meeting with Representative Tom Lantos (D-CA), Mrs. Lantos, Ambassador Feltman, senior staffer Alan Makovsky, and poloff at his home in Rabieh overlooking Beirut, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr reiterated what he told the Ambassador the previous day (reftel) of the GOL's intent to establish and maintain - with German support under the United Nations - sophisticated monitoring towers along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier to help interdict arms smuggling. Murr said he is not concerned by a threatened Syrian blockade of Lebanon in retaliation for the international presence on the border since this would control the border even more and turn the Lebanese against Syria. Murr discussed his reform of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), including a significant reduction in the number of Shi'a troops, and his plan for achieving Hizballah disarmament through solving the Sheba'a "pretext," exchanging prisoners, and beefing up the LAF. Murr noted that, ultimately, he would hope to arrange and participate in official discussions with Israel but only in the context of the 1949 Armistice Agreement. Murr said he would like to travel to Washington "next month" for official meetings. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Murr prefaced his comments with some background. Noting that he had fallen out of favor with the Syrians since his time as Interior Minister from 2000 to 2004 due to his effort to block the movement of jihadis from northern Lebanon to Iraq, Murr said that the Syrians had asked that he be given a new portfolio following President Lahoud's extension and the formation of a new government under Omar Karamah in September 2004. Murr refused the "humiliation" and only returned to government, as Deputy PM and Defense Minister, when Najib Mikati formed a new Cabinet in April 2005. Then followed a harrowing near-miss attempt on his life - using 100 kilograms of C4 - in July 2005. Following a recovery period, Murr returned to the Defense Ministry early this year. "At that point, I decided that since they've tried to keep me out of government, and now they've tried to kill me, well then I might as well get to work."

LAF REFORM

13. (C) Discussing his reform of the LAF, which had been "managed by the Syrians for 15 years," Murr said that he launched a recruiting drive with the goal of reducing the Shi'a content of the army. When he started recruiting, he claims, Shi'a still composed "60 per cent" of the military. After bringing in 18,000 new troops, Shi'a composition is now only "15 per cent." He has ensured that the officer corps receives its training in the West; in the past six months, according to Murr, 2000 officers have gone for training in the U.S. and Europe. Murr assured Rep. Lantos that the LAF's generals - who are 50 percent Christian, 25 percent Sunni, 5 percent Druze, and 20 percent Shi'a - are highly trustworthy, and that Murr has made sure to place brigades led by Shi'a generals in Sunni northern Lebanon to avoid Israeli accusations that sympathetic army officers may be abetting Hizballah in the South (Note. All units in the LAF, considered the one true non-sectarian national institution, are multi-confessional. End Note).

14. (C) Murr noted that he has made the Shi'a composition of the LAF artificially low as he hopes the LAF can eventually absorb some of Hizballah's militants into its ranks, thereby increasing the Shi'a content to a more equitable one-third of the force. Ideally, according to Murr, the LAF's confessional breakdown should be one-third Christian, one-third Sunni and Druze, and one-third Shi'a.

REMOVE HIZBALLAH'S PRETEXTS

15. (C) To achieve this goal, Murr says that the GOL needs to "take all the cards from Hizballah." Hizballah defends its right to maintain its arms on four issues: prisoners,

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mine maps, Sheba'a Farms, and the inability of the LAF to defend Lebanon. Murr believes the first two are the easiest since the prisoners can be solved through a swap and the LAF already has some of the IDF's maps of mine placements (which are inaccurate anyway since the mines have shifted over the years). On Sheba'a, Murr urged that the UN place the area under trusteeship, and that Syria be cornered into providing an official letter stating that Sheba'a is Lebanese.

16. (C) Murr sees the last of Hizballah's pretexts - the LAF's inability to defend Lebanon - as the key issue. The GOL is working with the international community to build up the LAF within "three months." Murr asked for a "green light" from the USG to begin purchasing heavy weaponry from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait using a recent \$800 million handout from the Saudis and Emiratis. (Note: As we understand, this money was intended for reconstruction, not assistance to the LAF. End note.) When the LAF is equipped and capable, then it can challenge Hizballah to show its true colors; either it is a nationalistic Lebanese organization that would be willing to deliver its weapons to the LAF, or it is simply a Syrian-Iranian proxy uninterested in preserving Lebanon's unity.

BORDER MONITORING

17. (C) Rep. Lantos and the Ambassador asked what the GOL intends to do to monitor its border with Syria and stop the resupply of arms to Hizballah. Murr replied that there are currently 8600 LAF troops stationed along or near the border. Further, the Cabinet decided to request foreign "support" and that German technicians would arrive in a few days "with equipment and under the UN flag" to help set up monitoring towers - with "radar, infra-green cameras, computer systems, and detection systems" - all along the 380km frontier with Syria. The Germans will help train the LAF, and will remain in an operational capacity - though under the umbrella of "training" - in support of the Lebanese.

THREATS OF A SYRIAN BLOCKADE

¶8. (C) Rep. Lantos asked what Murr expected the Syrian reaction would be to this stepped-up border monitoring. Does the GOL fear a Syrian blockade on the border, as President Asad is threatening? "That would be good," Murr replied; "that will help us control the border even more." Murr said that a Syrian blockade would also give the GOL leverage in getting the Israeli blockade eased, while it would turn the Lebanese against Syria.

TALKS WITH ISRAEL?

¶9. (C) Playing to Murr's ego and sense of his historic role, Rep. Lantos said that "this was one of the most impressive meetings I have had in a very long career." He pressed Murr on his willingness to engage Israel further. Murr said that now would not be the right time as rumors and sensitivities within Lebanon about collusion with Israel are running very high. However, Murr hopes that, as a "next step" in "two or three months," the Lebanese and Israeli political-military leadership might begin discussions, under UN auspices, on modifying the 1949 Armistice Agreement. Murr did not indicate whether these would be direct, face-to-face talks or follow the awkward LAF-UNIFIL-IDF indirect triangulation currently being employed, but he did signal his willingness to participate personally. The Ambassador pointed out that, if Israel would agree to talking about the Armistice Agreement (which is far from certain, we understand), any revision of the 1949 agreement would have to address the annex which limits troops numbers in the Lebanon-Israel border zone.

¶10. (U) Rep. Lantos did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.
FELTMAN